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**Abstract**

This paper presents a community based participatory research project, which adopted a photovoice approach with seven unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) living in foster care in the United Kingdom. The project also included a focus group with six foster carers to explore their perceptions of caring for UASCs. At the end of the focus group we then shared the young people's images from the photovoice project. The purpose of this was to better inform the carers understanding of this group's needs and the reality of their lived experiences, to see if this would have any impact on their perceptions or willingness to offer these children a placement in the future. The young people then developed the photographs into posters, which were shown at community events and exhibited in community spaces during refugee week.

Findings from the focus group show that some of these carers had anxieties and held misconceptions around caring for UASCs. This highlights the need for practitioners to engage in open conversations with foster carers, to discuss their perceptions and challenge any misconceptions. Furthermore, the project identified that some of these carers were concerned about being able to meet the cultural needs of the young people. Foster carers also seemed unaware of the available support in place to help with this. Therefore, it would be beneficial for foster care services and practitioners to ensure that carers are fully informed of the support and training available to them to assist in meeting UASCs cultural, religious and linguistic needs. The project also presents important lessons for researchers committed to finding ways to engage UASCs meaningfully in the research process. The action orientated approach of photovoice led to a wide range of public engagement activities, that allowed us to show important aspects of the young people's lived realities growing up in foster care.

**Keywords:** Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People, Separated Refugee Children, Foster care, Photovoice, Community Based Participatory Research, Public Engagement

## **Introduction**

As Hopkins and Hill (2008) have suggested, transnational migration is incredibly complex. It can occur for a myriad of reasons, involves crossing political, social, and cultural boundaries, requires a range of accommodations, and involves diverse populations, cultural systems, and power dynamics. Asylum seeking, a particular form of forced migration, is frequently prompted by major disruptive experiences in the country of origin that provoke unplanned journeys that cross geopolitical, socioeconomic, and climatic borders (UNHCR, 2005).

Researchers exploring forced migration have attended to the experiences of various social groups. For example, the literature has explored forced migration in relation to ethnicity (e.g., Castle, 2000), gender (e.g., Silvey, 2004), and family (e.g., Yeoh et al., 2005). However, as Hopkins and Hill (2008) have pointed out, the experiences of children in relation to forced migration have been underexplored, with children frequently included as an adjunct in relation to broader family experiences. Children are often portrayed as passive participants in the migration process (Dobson, 2009) and existing literature neglects the active role children and young people play in migration; their accounts are often missing (Hopkins and Hill 2008). Orellana et al. (2001, p.572) suggest that their representation in the literature has been comparable to 'luggage,' passively transported by the adults in their lives. As Hopkins and Hill (2008) have suggested, a passive construction of UASCs denies them the agency that frequently underpins their journeys. Many children have chosen to move and recognising them as "visible" from the point at which they become asylum seekers can detract from their right to be seen as "ordinary people, driven by ordinary desires, such as wanting to live in peace" (Robinson & Sergott, 2002, p. 64). In this paper, we agree with Hopkins and Hill's (2008) suggestion that "children, like adults, are part of the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers...it is important that we understand the ways in which children shape and experience such migrations" (p. 258). It is important to acknowledge that in recent years there has been a growing body of literature exploring the lives of UASCs (Koser 2016). However, it is still recognized that there is a need to further explore and represent the lived experiences of UASCs (Kohli & Kaukko 2017).

Throughout this paper we use the term unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), which is widely used in the United Kingdom (UK) context and emphasises the salient characteristics of a group that simultaneously present as both minors and asylum-seekers (Wernesjo, 2014). According to the United Nations' High Commission for Refugees' (UNHCR), such children are defined as "those [children] who are separated from both parents and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible to do so" (1994, p.121). It should be noted that some researchers and organisations prefer other terms when referring to such children. The Separated Children in Europe Programme uses the term "separated children" as it is suggested that it "...better defines the essential problem that children face. Namely, that they are without the care and protection of their parents or legal guardian and as a consequence suffer socially and psychologically from this separation" (Save the Children, 2004, p. 2). In this sense, children may not be "unaccompanied" per-se because they may have travelled with a sibling, trafficker, or agent (Hopkins & Hill, 2008). In the UK context, the term asylum-seeker indicates a person is yet to receive refugee status and this highlights their uncertain immigration status, which means they have temporary leave to remain until their asylum application is processed by the Home Office, a central government body.

Across the globe the effects of war and human rights abuses have resulted in increasing numbers of refugees, asylum seekers and in particular UASCs. For example, according to Eurostats (2015), 90,000 UASCs sought asylum in Europe in 2015 (a four fold increase from 2014). Half of these UASCs were Afghan and 16% were Syrian. In the UK there were 2,168 UASC asylum applications for the year ending June 2015, a 46% increase from 2014. These numbers of UK UASC asylum applications are not, however, unprecedented (in fact, they are similar to, or less than the numbers processed by other European nations, Wernesjo, 2014). The number of UASCs looked after by all local authorities in England was 4,210 in March 2016, more than double the number in March 2014 (ADCS, 2016).

In the UK, foster care has been the predominant placement choice for UASCs who arrive in the country. However, according to the ADCS (2016) there has been an ongoing shortage of foster carers for such children and, until recent moves to disperse new arrivals, a relatively small number of local authorities (particularly "port" authorities) had been supporting a disproportionately large number of UASCs. The UK government has promised to bring more UASCs safely into the country. There are plans to bring an additional 3,000 more UASCs under the Lord Dubs amendment that secured a commitment that Britain would give homes to UASCs

currently stranded in Europe (ADCS, 2016). The numbers could be much higher because it is difficult to forecast the pace and number of UASC arrivals, due to frequent clandestine arrivals and alterations in the pace and flow of refugee movements (ADCS, 2016). Accordingly, there is a significant need to ensure that UK foster care is equipped and prepared to support such children.

International definitions of foster care differ, for example in the US foster care can refer to substitute families but also include residential care settings, that can be referred to as foster homes (Colton & Williams 1997). Foster care in a UK context is the placement of children in public care with substitute families, carers who offer placements in their homes. These carers are recruited, assessed, trained and supported by a fostering service, which can be an organisation from the private, voluntary or public sector. Foster carers in the UK receive initial training to prepare them to foster and there is also an expectation for them to engage in ongoing training, which is outlined in statutory regulations (The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011). There are no requirements for carers to be trained specifically in supporting UASC. Wade et al (2012) study found that most of the carers in their study who fostered UASCs were satisfied with the support and training they received, however, there were some who felt less well prepared in their ability to meet young people's cultural needs and to support them through the asylum processes.

According to Wade et al.'s (e.g., Wade et al., 2005, Wade, 2009) research, identification of foster placements for all children and young people should involve a full assessment of their needs and wishes. However, there has been considerable variation in terms of the quality of needs assessments in relation to UASC in the UK, with many UASC requiring assessment in a very short time frame and needing accommodation on the day they first present to social services (Wade et al., 2005). Wade et al. (2005) identified that there was therefore an increased likelihood that UASC in the UK are more likely to use emergency fostering services or (if they are 17-18 years old) be offered independent and/or supported accommodation. In reality, this has meant that fostering for UASC in the UK has not always resulted in the most considered or appropriate placement for children and young people. Furthermore, there may be cultural differences in terms of how young people are regarded and the ways they are treated. For example, they may transition to adulthood earlier in some cultures and in this scenario foster care may offer less autonomy and independence than young people are used to (Wade et al., 2005). There may also be difficulties identifying placements that meet all UASC's needs. Wade

et al. (2005) also identified cultural matching may take precedence over other needs a young person may have. Some young people, for example, were in placements that were overcrowded in order to ensure a cultural match and this impeded other important needs and relational requirements they had (Wade et al., 2005). Indeed, this has also been found in other international studies (e.g., Ni Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015), where it has been suggested that cultural-matching "is not always the desired outcome for young people" (p. 266) as they not only seek to maintain continuity in relation to their original culture but also to develop a connection to their destination country. Hek (2007) has noted, for UASCs it is critical that foster care includes a more nuanced understanding of relational and community connection:

*"For unaccompanied children, with few, if any links in the UK, the support of social workers and foster carers in assisting them to make links, build relationships and become an integral part of different communities is key...Relationships with social workers and carers are key to helping children avoid serious emotional difficulties, to develop new connections, networks and to move forward and re-settle" (p. 119).*

However, there are significant barriers to the development of relational connection for UASCs in the context of foster care. For example, stigma, discrimination and violence (e.g., (Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, & Perhoniemi, 2006), coupled with a hardening anti-immigration attitude plaguing western democracies (e.g., Lubbers, Gijssberts, & Scheepers, 2002; Miklikowska, 2017; Semyonov, Raijman, & Gorodzeisky, 2006) has increased the risk of "Othering" UASCs in the minds of the public generally, as well as potential foster carers. Through this process of 'Othering' the public project onto these children, something, quality or identity that is undesirable, alien or potentially frightening or threatening (Krumer-Nevo, 2012; Schwalbe et al, 2000; Dalal, 2006), which dehumanises them, and is then used to justify and rationalise any unkind or rejecting treatment of them.

This paper presents a project that arose from an ongoing partnership between the university and a fostering service in an ethnically and culturally diverse city in the South West of England. Initially, a group of undergraduate social work students undertook a small-scale research project as a part of their first-year studies in the fostering service. The students facilitated a focus group with six carers that explored their views on fostering UASCs, their findings formed the basis for this project. The students found that many of the agencies experienced foster carers held significant concerns, misconceptions and stereotypes about

UASCs. The foster carers had all received some introductory training in fostering UASCs and had all been included in ongoing training groups where other foster carers who had UASCs in placement. The carers who had fostered UASCs talked very positively in the training groups about their experience of caring for this group of young people. Their experiences reflect the findings of Wade et al. (2012) who found nearly 80% of the carers in their sample that fostered UASCs felt placements were going very well, 19% felt it was going as well as could be expected, whilst only 1.5% reported the placements were not going very well. Despite hearing these positive experiences from fellow foster carers a number of these experienced carers still had concerns and anxieties that prevented them from offering a placement that they sometimes struggled to articulate. The students' research found the carers had fears about their capacity to meet UASCs' cultural and religious needs, which is also a concern expressed by some carers in existing research. For example, Wade et al (2012 p254) found carers who were fostering UASCs felt a 'substantial lack of support' and training in relation to this and stated that their findings 'point to the need for close attention to be given to the particular training needs of more experienced foster carers who may transition to fostering unaccompanied young people later in their fostering careers'. The carers in the student's focus group were also concerned about the age of UASCs, this is in a context where at the time, tabloid newspapers in the UK were questioning the legitimacy of UASCs on their front pages (Bowden 2016). Mitchell (2003) reviewed the 'limited' research evidence on age assessments of UASCs and highlighted concerns about how age is assessed in practice and how a complex task is often completed as a 'rudimentary exercise'. The carers in the student's focus group also had anxieties about what their family, friends and the local community might say about them being associated with UASCs. Furthermore, they had worries about terrorism and the potential for the young people to become radicalised. Lynch (2013) explains how the concept of radicalisation can be understood as either a causal factor leading to involvement in terrorism, or as a concept that suggests a staged process where a person becomes increasingly vulnerable to becoming a terrorist. Stanley & Guru (2015) have suggested that the current debates around childhood radicalisation form a moral panic and that the issue must be carefully and morally approached by social work practitioners.

Accordingly, it is in this context of an increased need for UASC foster care placements the continued shortage of available carers and the 'othering' of asylum seekers that we designed this action orientated research project. The aim of the project was to build on the work of the social work students, to learn more about existing foster carer's perceptions of fostering

UASCs. After this we wanted to attempt to shift any misconceptions and stereotypes they held, by sharing the voices of UASCs and their lived realities of growing up in foster care. To achieve this, we undertook a photovoice project with seven young people placed in foster care. After the focus group with the carers we shared the photographs the young people took, which facilitated discussions with the carers about the young people's day to day lives.

## **2) Methods**

The project was granted ethical permission through the University of Bath. Informed consent was obtained from the young people at an initial meeting where the project was fully explained to them. Albanian and Afghan interpreters were present to check that the young people understood. The young people's social workers also provided consent for them to participate. Informed consent was also gained from the foster carers at the start of the focus group. Throughout the project pseudonyms were used for confidentiality.

### **2.1) Community Based Participatory Research and Photovoice**

This project was funded by the University of Bath Public Engagement Unit, which promotes engaged scholarly activity, particularly in the local community. In recent years, the mission of public engagement in UK Universities has shifted from a level of engagement that focuses on the dissemination of research findings to a participatory approach to research that involves various 'publics' throughout the process, with the aim of achieving mutual benefits for those involved. Involvement in participatory research can be understood as being on a spectrum, where at one end people are merely consulted on aspects of the project to the other end of the spectrum where people lead the research as equal partners, co designing the research, collecting data, analysing data and taking an active role in the dissemination of the findings (Rogers 2012). In this project it is important to acknowledge the young people's participation was absent in the initial research design, we did consult with practitioners in the agency at the start of the project and their practice expertise helped to shape the design. The young people were actively involved throughout the photo-voice phase of the study, in the collection of the data and developing the posters to show to the public.

The seven, unaccompanied asylum seeking young people who took part were living in foster care in the South West of England. All of the young people were male, aged between 14-16 years old, six were from Afghanistan and one from Albania. All the participants had been in



the country for less than six months, their asylum applications were in process, as such they all shared an uncertainty about their ability to remain in the country beyond their eighteenth birthday.

It is important for researchers to build relationships with young people and to develop a rapport and build trust (Butler & Williamson 1994). This is a particular challenge for researchers engaging with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children as many have reason not to trust adults. UASCs are likely to have faced considerable challenges, they often experience trafficking and exploitation in their journeys (Gearon 2017) and face questioning from adults in authority who have a power to determine their asylum status. These experiences can lead to young people having to carefully manage their stories and what they share with adults (Kohli 2006). To try to overcome some of these challenges we organised six activity sessions with the young people, which ranged from art workshops to rock climbing, designed to build relationship and build shared understanding between us. These sessions then enabled us to both get to know the young people and then develop our research with them.

A photovoice approach was used alongside these activities and the participants took photographs during the sessions as well as in their foster placements and local community. We believe that the combination of photography and activities ensured the project was not only participatory but ultimately fun for the young people. Participatory approaches to research with refugees have been proposed as an ethical form of research and a necessary extension to the 'do no harm' principle (Ellis et al, 2007; Hugman, Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2011). Furthermore, the use of photography was also valuable as it facilitated interaction and communication, particularly in a context where the young people had only recently arrived in the UK (within the last six months) and none of them spoke English as their first language. Previous studies have used photography with UASCs predominantly as a way to gather data using photo-elicitation techniques (Wells 2011; Wernesjo 2014). Community organisations have utilised the photovoice approach as a way to promote integration of refugees into local communities. The photovoice approach has been used previously in practice as a way to challenge stereotypes of refugees. A key aspect of the photovoice approach is to 'promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs' (Wang & Burris 1997 p.369). This ensures an action orientated approach that moves beyond using the photographs as purely a source of data for analysis. The Moving Lives photovoice project engaged with 120 young refugees living in London over a period of five years (Orton

2009). Orton (2009 p.8) described how, in *Moving Lives*, presenting the young people's photographs of their day to day lives made people see the 'young people, not just as refugees, but as young people with different sensibilities, attitudes, ambitions and hopes for their future'. With our knowledge from our students focus group about the potential for carers to hold misconceptions and stereotypes we felt adopting this approach could be beneficial.

The young people in this study were asked to take as many photographs as they wanted of things that were important to them in their day to day lives, people, places, and objects. The young people were given digital cameras that they could keep after the project. The young people's photographs represented visual reflections that depicted important aspects of the participant's life in foster care, and provided us with rich visual data to analyse. The images were analysed through a critical-realist approach whereby we examined what was depicted in the photographs whilst critically reflecting on the representational practices that are associated with its construction (Margolis & Pauwel 2011) in conversation with the young people. Furthermore, our social work commitment to a relationship based approach (Wilson et al, 2011), throughout the project, allowed us to develop an understanding of the young people's experiences as we gained an understanding of their personal narratives. This subsequently informed our analysis and understanding of the young people's images and gave us an ability to place them in context.

## 2.2 A focus group for foster carers and a photovoice presentation.

The characteristics of the foster carers in the focus group were as follows. There were six carers who were unrelated and therefore represented six different fostering households. All of the carers were experienced and had been approved as carers for over a year. None of the carers had fostered UASCs, however they all knew carers that had. Only one of the carers had previously looked after children from a different ethnic background to their own. There were three carers present who were open to fostering UASCs, none had any experiences of doing so. There were three carers present who stated at the start of the focus group that they had no interest in fostering UASCs.

The focus group enabled us to gather qualitative data relating to the carers perceptions of fostering unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The focus group was digitally recorded and transcribed. The transcription was then analysed using thematic analysis. which promotes a

process of familiarisation from the point of undertaking the transcription. Transcripts are then coded line by line and subsequent themes are identified from the list of codes, which are then reviewed, defined and named (Braun and Clarke 2006). At the end of the focus group we then went on to present a wide range of the young people's photographs to the carers, in a PowerPoint presentation, showing their day to day lives with their foster carers. It was also an opportunity to engage in a discussion exploring the complexity of fostering UASCs from the starting point of the carers perspectives.

### 2.3 Wider public engagement: pathways to impact

In its broadest definition, public engagement in research can be understood as researchers engaging with communities outside of academia. This can be a community of people with shared circumstances/interests or a community of place, which includes people that share a common geography. We aimed to disseminate the findings from the project widely and in keeping with the photovoice approach, to engage relevant communities (Wang & Burris 1997). We achieved this in several ways; we developed a range of posters with the young people that included the photographs they wanted to share. These posters were then exhibited in a number of public spaces, at the University public art space during refugee week and at a community event during refugee week called the 'celebrating sanctuary festival'. This project was subsequently recognised for a national award, it was shortlisted for the Engage Award for Public Engagement, which enabled us to further engage with the broader communities. This included an article in the non-academic press (Rogers 2017), an interview on the local radio station and the production of a short online video explaining the work, which was hosted on the University website and accompanied by a press release. This also led to a conference presentation and an appearance on the national TV breakfast news in Australia, discussing the project. The significance of this public engagement is that it enabled us to discuss the need for more carers for UASCs but importantly to present the lived realities of the young people to a wide audience. Public engagement in the UK is recognised by the Higher Education regulator (HEFCE) as an important way to achieve impact, it is also described by the research funding councils (i.e ESRC) as being a pathway to impact. It is difficult to ascertain the impact of the engagement from this research. We share the view of Ni Mhurchu et al. (2017) that a public engagement pathway leading to impact from research is not a linear path, and impact can occur from a body of work, indeed from a collective of scholars, and happen incrementally over time.

### **3 Results**

A key characteristic of community based participatory research is the balance it strikes between research and action, which leads to mutual benefits for researchers and community groups (Holkup et al 2004). There are challenges in writing up this kind of engaged scholarly activity in a traditional format for an empirical journal article. To overcome this, we have separated the results into two sections in keeping with these key characteristics; firstly, the results from the empirical **research** are presented; secondly, the **actions** are described, which arose from the participatory approach that was used.

#### **3.1 Research**

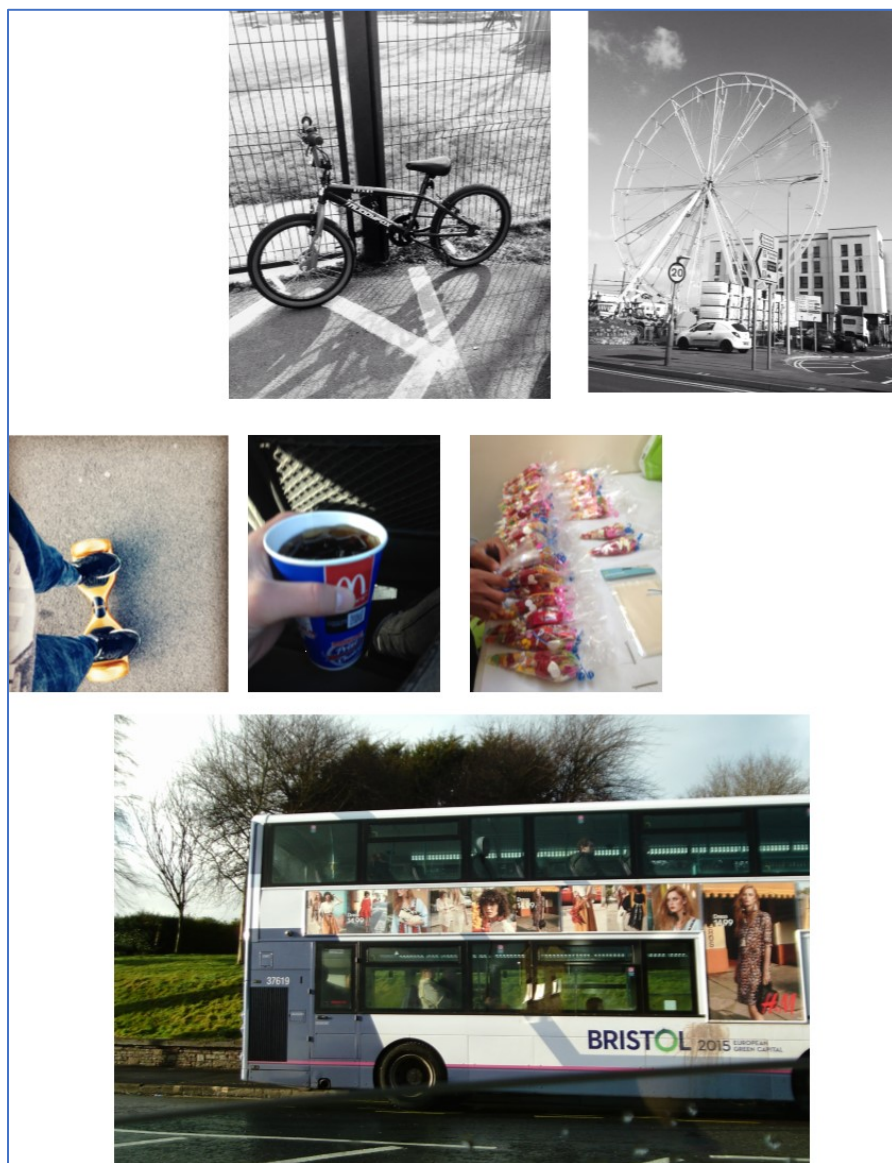
In this part of the results section findings relating to the young people's photographs will be presented that explores their day to day lives in foster care, this is followed by findings from the focus group with foster carers.

##### **3.11 Young people's photographs**

The seven young people produced 236 photographs in total for the project. In this section we will discuss two key themes that emerged from the analysis of these images; 1) Ordinary experiences in extraordinary circumstance; 2) Building relationships. The themes were not initially identified based on quantifiable measures, instead, in keeping with thematic analysis, we established themes based on what Braun and Clarke (2007) refer to as a themes 'keyness' in relation to the research topic. However, it is interesting to reflect post analysis that of the 236 photographs taken, 127 of them were coded with the term 'ordinary experiences', whilst 96 (some images overlapped themes) images were coded as building relationships. The prevalence of these two themes does offer an indication of their significance across the dataset.

3.111 Ordinary experiences in extraordinary circumstances.

Fig. 1.



From a selection of the young people's images above (Fig. 1), you can see how they are engaging in activities such as BMX bike riding, hover boarding, there were other images that showed them 'hanging out' at the skateboard park with their friends. They also photographed local shops selling Halal food, buses, buildings and streets. The images at first glance may seem ordinary, they could be everyday pictures from any young person's mobile phone

recording daily life. And dozens of photographs were taken by the young people. However, if these pictures can be seen through an understanding of these young people's experiences of displacement, then these photographs could be argued to be extraordinary, and seen differently. Analysing them we could understand them as captured images that they might want to show their families back home were they to be reunited with them, to show them their everyday experience of life in the UK. 'This is the food I ate, here is where I went to school, this is where I lived'. Furthermore, we could see these images as remarkable because whilst they showed a group of young people that are often 'Othered' as discussed above, and seen as different; in these images they were 'everyday' children. These were not images of children and young people who were only defined by their status as asylum seekers but here their identity as children was most prominent. The everyday images therefore provided an opportunity for them to be seen in a way that they are rarely represented, as children and young people first and this helped to challenge the narrative of them as 'alien'.

### 3.112 Building relationships

The images showed the ways that the young people had begun to build relationships to their community and their family. The children's ambitions and their desire to succeed at school shone through in a number of photographs. They took lots of selfies in school uniforms, they photographed their journey to school and back home again, familiar landmarks from their daily journeys were repeatedly documented. For example, a concave mirror used to help cars on a country lane was noticed and photographed one day, then returned to the next day and photographed again with the child included in the picture with their bike. Then friends were included in subsequent shots. Everyday objects were used to build their own local stories, and offering a complete contrast to the migration stories they are more used to sharing with immigration authorities, social workers and foster carers. For us these local journeys took on a significance because of their familiarity and relatability. In our discussions with the young people about these images they reflected on these local journeys in a way any child would take to school. These journeys that the children were showing in the photographs demonstrated how they were building a relationship with their new community.

The images showed also the relationships the young people were developing with their foster carers and their carer's wider families. The children took numerous selfies with their foster carers and their children, in the car on the way to school, at birthday parties with extended foster

family members. There were images of mealtimes, snapchat selfies with faces swapped, communities showing school uniforms (worn proudly), and local landmarks from double decker buses to the Clifton suspension bridge. Looking at these images with the children we saw (and they then described to us) their pride at being in the UK and their developing relationships, to friendship groups, foster families and school friendship groups. Most powerful were a series of 'selfies' taken by one young person wearing a Union Jack T shirt. Some with mirrored sunglasses, with styled hair, with pulled faces. But all with the Union Jack T shirt. To see such an iconic image being used in such an ordinary way by a young person who would more typically be depicted in the media as 'foreign' or 'other' gave us a powerful contrasting image and a very different relationship with this young person. Through these images he made powerful statements about how he defined himself and how he saw himself. In the later focus groups these photographs had quite an impact on foster carers perceptions, discussed further below.

Alongside the photographs we undertook activities with the boys that always ended with their favourite activity of cricket. These activities enabled us to build a rapport that enabled us to learn about the young people's narratives from their perspective. The photographs themselves did not capture aspects of their migration journeys, but by considering what was missing from the young people's photographs the extraordinary context of their arrival in the UK is apparent. For example, previous studies that have engaged young people in foster care using photography show how they often preserve their personal possessions to maintain their links with past relationships (Rogers 2015). However, personal possessions in these young people's photographs were either entirely absent or they showed recently acquired items gained in their foster placements. To us, this absence of possessions illustrated the nature of their forced migration and the need to leave things behind.

### 3.12 Foster carers focus group

The focus group consisted of six foster carers and was facilitated by one member of the research team. There were three carers present who were open to fostering UASCs, none had any experiences of doing so. There were also three carers who had no interest in fostering UASCs. Through the analysis of data three themes emerged which represented the foster

carers key perceptions of unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors. These three themes are discussed below.

### 3.121 Concerns about meeting children's cultural, religious and linguistic needs

A number of the carers held the view that they were ill equipped to meet the young people's cultural, religious and linguistic needs. The excerpt from the transcript below encapsulates how apprehensive the carers would feel about getting this right and how they would find it challenging.

Kerry: See I wouldn't know what they eat or any of that, do they mind being somewhere with someone who is completely ignorant about their culture.

Julie: I don't even know if there is a mosque round my way

Kerry: And in terms of language I don't know how we would cope. What happens with translators? Is there one on tap like if you need it? Say the young person had a temperature and tummy ache at two o'clock in the morning how would I know what was wrong, what would I do? That would worry me.

However, there was a carer present who had previous experience of caring for a Muslim child, and their experience shows just how carers can make it their business to ensure a child's needs are met, which includes cultural and religious needs.

Theresa: I did have a British Muslim child placed with me once, we had to come into the city to get his halal food. It was an hours drive but we did it, it just needed to be done no big deal you just do it. It was just meeting his needs.

### 3.122 Concerns about radicalisation

The following excerpt from the transcript highlights some of the worries that some foster carers had about the potential for radicalisation of Muslim young people.

Sally: I am not racist by no means, but I just got something up in my head that all these children or so called children trying to come over here, I refuse to



foster any of them, because I have just got it up here in my head that they will be up in their bedroom making bombs.

Researcher: So you would be concerned about terrorism?

Sally: Don't ask me why, but I am being honest, I just got it up here, From our point of view watching the news you seen all the men coming across don't you, on lorries, and you do worry about terrorism.

This carer was clearly being open and honest in her reflections about her feelings. This was Sally's starting point she refused to foster this group because of these concerns. It is also important to highlight that other carers in the group offered a very different perspective and challenged this view.

Peter: They are escaping terrorism though aren't they and think about the Paris stuff they are all French nationals, born there.

### 3.123 Concerns about ages

It is important to frame the carers concerns about ages in the context of tabloid news stories, which were running within days of the focus group. The Daily Star for example, had pictures on their front page of young people who recently arrived in the UK from the Calais migrant camp known as the Jungle. These images clearly identified the young people and they were shown alongside an article that went on to question their ages and their right to claim asylum (Bowden 2016). The concerns expressed below show the carers starting point in relation to this. The carers were concerned, however, these concerns were not about whether the young people were legitimate asylum seekers, they centered on concerns around safeguarding children from adults. For example, Theresa was concerned about adults potentially attending school with children.

Theresa: Also are they not worried that they are 20 something and going to school with younger kids?

Whilst Julie was reflecting on what this could mean in her role as a carer, bringing young people into her family and the potential safeguarding implications she perceived.

Julie: Well, I got grandkids and I don't want them being around any adults who are pretending to be teenagers you know what I mean.

Across the group there were some reflections as to why young adults might be guarded about sharing their age. So along with the concerns about safeguarding these carers were also empathic to the reasons why.

Kerry: They are told not to tell their age. As they are worried about being sent back.

The next section of the results will focus on the 'action' orientated element that arose from this participatory project and this includes some further discussion on ages of UASCs, which were prompted by the carers reflecting on the presentation of the young people's photographs of their daily lives.

### **3.2 Action**

A key aspect of photovoice is to promote a 'critical dialogue' with groups (Wang & Burris 1997). In a context where there are misconceptions and concerns about unaccompanied asylum seeking young people and an increasing need for more placements we targeted two important groups. Firstly, we wanted to engage with the current carers in the fostering services and then through public engagement activities the wider public, who could potentially become prospective foster carers. We took the opportunity to engage in discussions with the foster carers at the end of the focus group, it proved to follow on nicely after gathering their perceptions of fostering UASCs, it allowed us to unpack the concerns they had expressed about fostering this group whilst focusing on the images that reflected the young people's day to day lives in foster care. The quotations from the transcript below highlight the shift that some of the carers had in their perceptions when they were presented with the young people's lived realities seen through these photographs.

Sally: That one in the bottom corner he would worry me looks a bit old... ah but there he is again on that photo up there on the swing and he looks cheeky and all, he is just a boy! ...I think with me I need to meet these children now, come to the group perhaps stand back and watch, say hello get to know them a bit.

The quotation above represents a softening of opinion from Sally who previously stated that she has refused to offer a placement to an UASC, expressing strong concerns around radicalisation. and concerns about the young people's ages. In this quotation her concerns about age are initially still apparent, however, when she sees a photograph of a young person on a swing she shifts from trying to assess the young person's age to seeing him as 'just a boy'.

Sally: That second one along he is right up my street he is a cheeky chappy, I bet you can have a real laugh with him!

Researcher: The groups were really fun, there was a lot of banter between the boys especially when they were playing cricket!

Sally: See that is important for me and my family, us lot are full of banter any kiddie fitting in with us needs to be able to have a laugh. It was because of all the scaremongering on the news and after talking to you and seeing these photos I got to say I am quite tempted to look into it

Julie: I told you that you would go home with a referral!

Sally: Oh, you got me there, it is upsetting, the poor buggers, different country and no family. You think all they been through and they just want a safe haven.

This quotation is particularly powerful when you reflect on Sally's initial perceptions and her concerns around UASCs involvement in terrorism. It shows the power of the photovoice approach and the impact of the young people's images that we shared. As previously mentioned around the same time of this focus group there were powerful discourses using language that could be argued to dehumanise asylum seekers and refugees, such as Prime Minister David Cameron describing people migrating through Calais as a 'swarm' and the

tabloid newspapers questioning UASCs ages and their legitimacy to seek asylum. The sharing of these images showed the reality of the young people's day to day lives in foster care. These photographs created by the young people promoted a much more empathic response in the carers perceptions, which is encapsulated in this quotation from Theresa.

Theresa: I am looking at them now and feeling quite sorry for them, to think that some of these boys might be returned back to Afghanistan too, that really shocks me. They are just human beings...Thinking about it there is no difference to these kids than any other kids we foster is there.

#### **4 Discussion**

Findings from the photographs provided a strong contrast between the young people's migration stories and their more settled lives with foster families. Whilst we did not explicitly ask about their migration stories we had some awareness both from the boys themselves and from foster carers and agency social workers. This provided a backdrop and often subtle narrative of separation, trauma and loss for these young people. We knew that they had all witnessed abuses during their flight from often life-threatening situations and they spoke about this. We knew that they were left worried about loved ones left behind, often not sure if remaining family members were alive or dead. Many of the children and young people had been trafficked and been in the hands of gangs who had threatened and exploited them during their journey here, and might continue to do so in the UK. We were aware of brothers being reunited in the UK after years spent apart not knowing if either was still alive or not, of journeys packed into the boot of cars, crushed underneath others, beaten if they cried out or made any noise, of hunger and exposure to cold, cruelty and abuse. Some had witnessed family members being killed, some had been driven out from their villages and could never return, others had families who had sold everything to fund their journey to safety. They could not return either safely or without shame if they did not have the ability to repay their debts, financially or personally. The analysis of the photographs in this project reinforce findings from previous studies (Robinson & Sergott, 2002; Kohli & Mitchell 2007) that show despite these challenging experiences and desperately sad narratives these young people also demonstrate strength and resilience. They are grateful for finding security in the UK and they have ambition and hope for their futures.

Findings from the focus group with the existing foster carers showed the reluctance that some had in offering placements to UASCs. This partly stemmed from a lack of confidence in being able to meet the cultural, religious and linguistic needs of the young people. This is a finding consistent with existing research where some carers report feeling under prepared to meet the cultural needs of UASCs (Wade et al. 2012). The discussions with the foster carers led to them making suggestions about how this could be addressed. For example, at the end of the photo discussions they were all open to attending further training that focuses on the practicalities of meeting the needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Furthermore, one of the most reluctant participants Sally, stated that she would not only benefit from further training on the subject but she would also like to get practical experience, meeting with the unaccompanied asylum seeking young people placed in the agency, and meeting their carers. Findings from the focus group therefore suggest that there is scope for fostering services to make carers more aware of the practical support and resources available to carers who provide a placement to a refugee child. For example, the access they can have to language line, which is a telephone interpreter service that is made available to carers.

Findings, also showed that some of these carers had significant misconceptions and concerns about UASCs. Some were concerned about the young people being dishonest about their ages, whilst others were concerned about the potential for the young people to be radicalised. These findings show that these carers views reflect those of wider society, which often consists of polarised positions on the politicised topic of migration and displaced people (Zizek 2017). Despite some carers expressing these views this project also demonstrated the power of engaging in a critical and open dialogue. It showed that the powerful impact that exposing people to the realities of the young people's lived experiences can have. By doing this, albeit on a small scale, we showed it is possible to shift perceptions and develop empathy. The carers in this study were open about their feelings and perceptions and they were also very reflective and willing to challenge their own perceptions.

Although it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study, in particular the small sample size, these findings do have potential implications for family placement practice. For example, the current practice focus in UK child welfare is to wherever possible prioritise culturally matched placements for UASCs (Wade et al., 2005). However, with limited numbers of carers the ability to perfectly match children and carers on ethnic, cultural and religious characteristics is limited. As highlighted in the existing literature, the importance of doing so

should be balanced with the need to find carers who are able to meet the young people's wider range of needs (Ni Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015).

An important finding from this study is that existing foster carers are open to dialogue about providing cross cultural placements, even those that are initially reluctant and who hold some misconceptions. However, as previous research has highlighted (Wade et al 2012) existing would also benefit from training and practical support to ensure they are best able to meet children and young people's needs, including their cultural, religious and linguistic needs. Furthermore, findings suggest that fostering services would benefit from providing a space for their existing carers to reflect on their assumptions and discuss their concerns about providing placements to asylum seeking young people. As well as engaging in critical discussions challenging stereotypes. In this project we used photovoice to achieve this, practitioners maybe able to find creative ways to achieve similar results. For example, with discussions about films or news items that present the lived realities of UASCs, alongside a presentation of the research evidence that shows the positive experiences of those carers who have been open to foster UASCs (Wade et al 2012).

## **5) Conclusion**

Public engagement has been embedded from the start of this project and we feel it has led to a valuable form of scholarly engagement, it has ensured an action-orientated approach aiming to have a direct impact in the local community. We engaged with the public, with the hope that the project could facilitate change to better improve foster care provision for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people. We hope we have planted some seeds of change and the findings from the focus group suggest that the open dialogues we engaged in had made an impact. However, we acknowledge that a limitation of these research engagement activities is that we missed the policy audience. Going forward, we would like to develop the photovoice approach further by organising events showcasing the images in order to specifically target policy makers, which would ensure voices are heard at the macro level, which Wang & Burris (1997) advocate for in their vision of the photovoice method.

The value of community based participatory research is in the mutual benefits it provides for those that get involved. In this project for the young people who took part, the workshops were filled with fun and laughter. We also promoted their voice and shared their experiences

with a range of publics, which we hope the young people found empowering. For the fostering service, we developed an open and honest dialogue with carers and social work practitioners (in subsequent training) about fostering unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. For us as the research team, the past twelve months has shown the value of collaboration with community groups. We have gathered data but more we have also engaged with the young people, carers, social workers and the wider public with the initial aim of improving foster care provision in our local community. However, we are hopeful through sharing the lessons we learned in this international journal we can contribute to the growing body of literature on the important topic of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

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